

ACTION LINE/11G
MISS MANNERS/2G
HELP YOURSELF/3G
ELAN, TOO/4G

Living Today

Sunday, May 31, 1987

The Miami Herald Section G



PRAYER A Hare Krishna burns incense in front of the altar of the temple in a converted Art Deco hotel at 24th and Collins.

W HERE ANYTHING GOES

WHAT'S THIS PLACE ABOUT?
IN A MARCH OUTRAGE



By DEBBIE SONTAG
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Morris and Joy Rosenthal have a late Sunday afternoon ritual. First they indulge in chicken soup and stuffed cabbage at Wolfe's delicatessen, then they stroll to 24th Street to watch the Hare Krishnas.

Holding hands, the Rosenthals, retirees from Montreal, lean against the railing of the Miami Beach boardwalk and cluck. Tsk, tsks, they say, as women in saris, men in saffron robes and tiny boys with shaved heads mill about the pool deck of the old Boardwalk Hotel.

"Characters," Morris Rosenthal says. "Such characters. An anthropologist could have a field day in this area."

Indeed.

Packed into the five blocks between 20th and 25th streets on Miami Beach is a world of eccentricities. It's at once seedy and serene, honky-tonk and highbrow. It's life choreographed to the waltzed pace of a bingo game and to the nervous cha-cha-cha of a furtive drug deal.

AT THE TURNING POINT

Wolfe's, an institution built on pickles and coleslaw, is surrounded by porno movie theaters featuring "GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS . . . and some boys, too." Place Pigalle, an aging strip joint, is neighbor to Club Nu, the newest of trendy discos. The Krishna center abuts a hotel for elderly Orthodox Jews. A gay resort is down the street from an art museum, which is around the corner from a crack dealers' hangout. Nestled among retiree hotels is the Monkey Bar, so named for its clientele. A slice of New York City might reveal the same mixed grill, if you could slow the pace and thin the crowd.

On lonely 23rd Street, when a Hasidic Jew in a long black coat shuffles routinely past a drag queen blowing kisses to passing cars, the juxtaposition, however matter-of-fact, is salient.

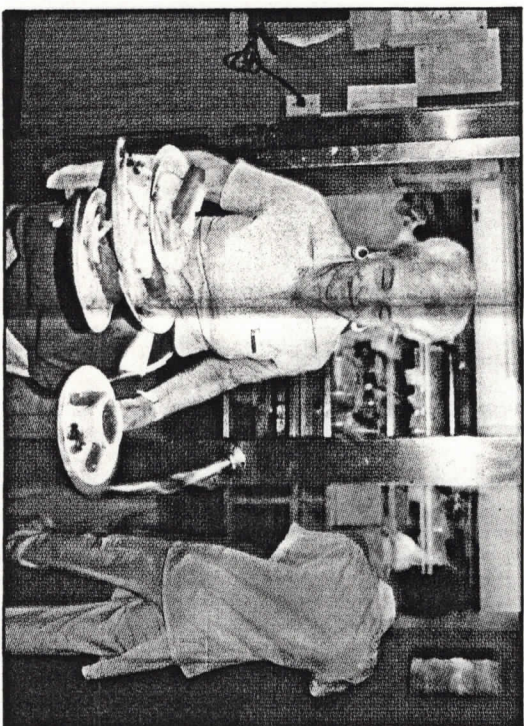
"Sometimes, at Wolfe's, you'll have a guy with an earring looking across the counter at an old Jewish lady who's looking over at a purple-haired punker who's staring at an after-theater couple in tuxedos and jewels. They size each other up and then they all eat their soup," says David Nevel, the owner of Wolfe's.

To go behind the scenes in this district is to ponder

Please turn to SOUTH BEACH / 6G



DARE The 20th Street neighborhood is a mix of strip shows and burlesque houses. An elderly Miami Beach woman walks past one of the signs for the Gayety 2 Peep Show.



FARE Waitress Helen Goldstein rushes out of the kitchen at Wolfe's with an order of food.



BLARE With his trademark haircut, singer John Sex performs for the opening of Club Nu.

... AND FOR SOME UNFORTUNATE SOULS, IT'S TOO MUCH

"I hate old people," one of my editors once told me. "I worked on the Beach too long," she said, "and I can't go to the grocery store with them; I can't stand in line behind them; I can't listen to the complaining and the endless

recurring. I was dumbstruck. We all get old. How did this person intend to deal with her parents when they started aging? Had she never been around grandpar-

ents? Had she never seen someone close to the family grow forgetful, cranky and incontinent? How blind did she want to be?

During the decade or so that she had worked on the Beach, this woman had held various jobs and always had a 20- to 30-minute commute from North or South Dade. She would never live on the peninsula called the most priceless piece of real estate in America. She might stop by Epicure to buy a fancy dessert, but

never would she go to Publix and stand in line. She kept her distance the way a day care worker keeps her distance from children; after an eight-hour day, she doesn't want to be near noise and commotion until she returns to work the next day.

It was difficult to imagine feeling as strongly as she did, I had been reared by parents who had children late. My fa-



GAIL MEADOWS

Please turn to MEADOWS / 7G

5/31/87
Fender

On South Beach, you'll find that anything goes

SOUTH BEACH / from 1G
der how so many different cul-
tures can coexist in so small an ar-
ea without colliding. To do so now
is inviting because the 21st Street
area seems poised for change.

The first sign is the \$2 million Club Nu. Next is the new commu-
nity center, programmed for cul-
ture, recently opened on Washing-
ton Avenue. By summer, there will
be a cafe and two restaurants in
the retiree hotels. The city is con-
sidering a 1,000-room hotel by the
Bass Museum. That museum is ex-
panding. Even the Place Pigalle
wants to "upgrade," in its owner's
words.

"I've been in on the ground floor
of Miami Beach, up to the heights
of glory, back down, crash
through to the gutter and now I
feel like I'm at the ground floor all
over again," says Harry Ridge, 79,
and Place Pigalle's owner for 30
years.

Before long, these streets could
lose their richness of character. So
here's a peek at the vanishing di-
versity in all its sordid charm, a
guide to the eclectic 21st Street ar-
ea.

The Krishnas

To reach the Hare Krishna tem-
ple, take the elevator to the sev-
enth floor of the Deco building at
2445 Collins Ave.

Take off your shoes. Step onto
the cool marble floor and look be-
yond to the blue, blue Atlantic. A
spiritual view. Fall to your stom-
ach, facing east.

Breathe in. No sea breeze here.
That's hand-rolled incense, thick
and pungent.

A strange horn sounds twice,
the call of a conch shell. Bells
chime. A brown curtain pulls back
to reveal an elaborate altar com-
manded by two ceremonial priests,
monastic-looking, hairless men in
linchcloths.

The chanting starts slowly. So
does the swaying.
Three men lead. One pounds a

and your occasional person who
just wants a Bud."
It's a relatively peaceful place
now, says the bartender.
"All we have is a bunch of fist-
fights between men," he says.
"And roaches. A lot of roaches.
You think they have roaches over
at Club Nu?"

Club Nu

The door maiden at Club Nu
wears a patent leather dress and
patent leather gloves. She prom-
ises adventure.

"There's more patent leather in-
side . . . much more," says Teresa
Fahmie, 25.

She doesn't warn that by 2 in
the morning, people will be danc-
ing in their underwear.

"I don't know if I'd call this
yuppies. It's metro, sophisticated,"
says Margaret Zempleno, 28, a
medical services coordinator from
Fort Lauderdale.

The 20,000-square-foot club is
an elaborate maze of tiers, each
with different privileges for dif-
ferent fees, cordoned off by wom-
en in patent leather.

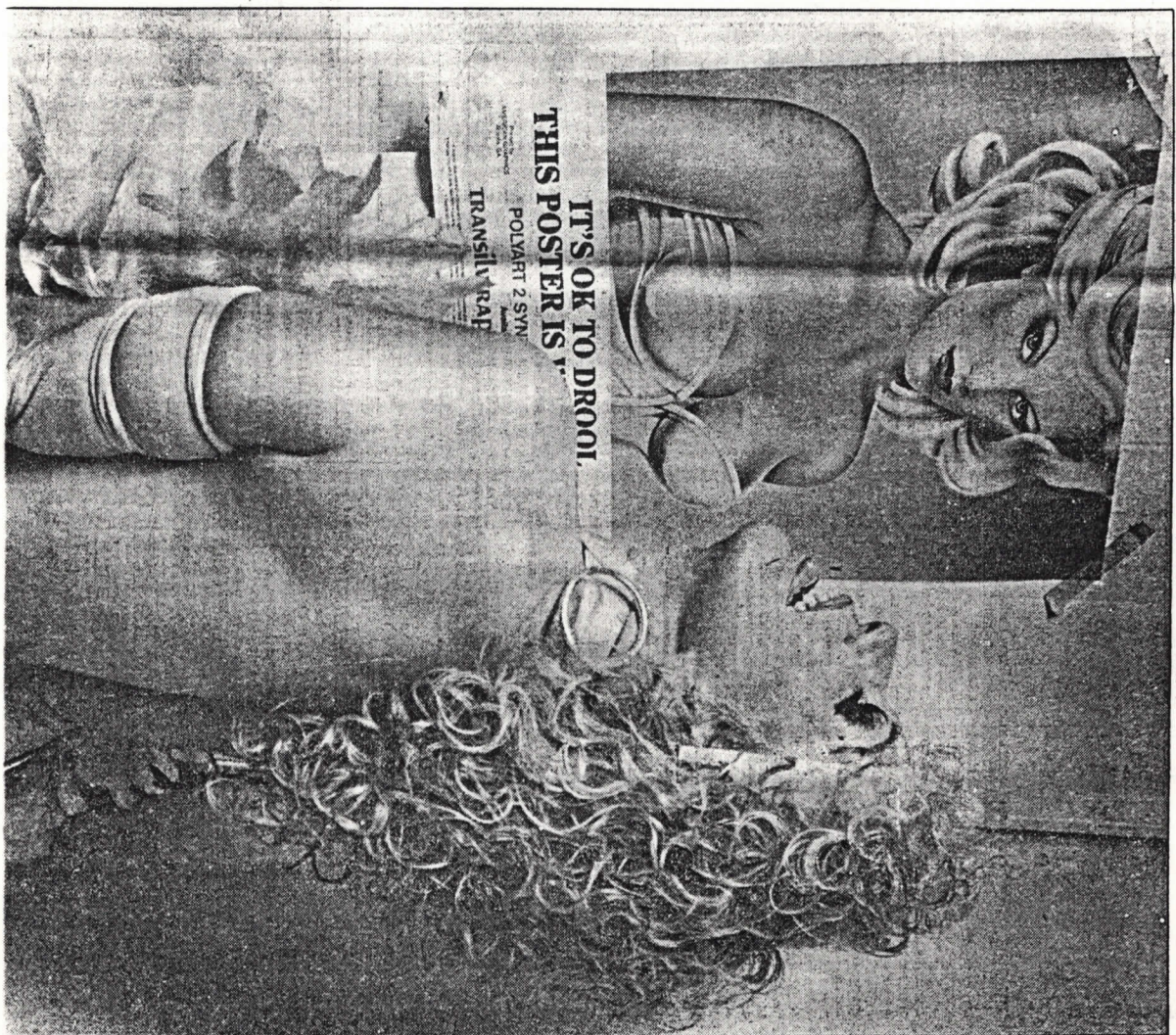
For \$3,000 a night — a year's
rent at the nearby Caracas Hotel
— you can lease the Celebrity
Room to be apart from the crowd.
It has zebra-skin seats and a pri-
vate silver service floor.

The club's prices, \$15 nightly
admission, \$300 or \$500 member-
ships — will protect Nu from its
neighbors, the new clients hope.
The dues will keep out the low-

life, says Paige Allen, 23.
On a hot night at the new Nu, so
many young people with gravity-
defying hair and dresses of syn-
thetic materials are eager to make
an appearance that there is actual-
ly traffic in a neighborhood usual-
ly easily altered.

By about 10 p.m., all this
leather and the just down the
street from the Honey Plaza?"

says Guest List Cole's young. She's
referring to the black-tie appa-
riment house, long a haven for
man-fishes and campfire dinners



5/21/87
Herald

Three men lead. One pounds a drum, another beats finger cymbals. They all wear watches. Gradually, the pace picks up. The plectrums a feathered thing that waves like a dust mop. One man seems lost in a kind of do-si-do solitaire. The cymbals clang to climax. Suddenly everyone is back on the floor, nose to the marble. Enter Hridayananda das Goswami, high-ranking spiritual master. "How are y'all doing?" he says, assuming the lotus position on a fringed settee, a microphone at his side. Sundays are open house at the Krishna hotel, home to about 70 devotees. "We do our best to try and engage everyone — intelligentia, literate, scam, bum," says Prita Devi Das (born Tracy Fleming) of California, a Valley Girl in a sari. Seven years ago, when the Krishnas set up shop on Collins Ave., "the neighbors freaked," Devi Das says. Now, they come for the free vegetarian Sunday dinner, "a split-krishna feast, all you can eat," the Krishnas say. One neighbor, Tom Holmes, an ex-alcoholic, found Krishna after finding Judaism. "A voice told me to study the Bhagavad Gita," he says, referring to the Hindu text. "Fortunately I had one lying around that someone once gave me at the Newark airport." Another neighbor, Judith Gold, 60, finds the ceremony "exotic" and the free dinner "a bargain, and slimming, too." The Krishnas says Jiva Goswami Das, 21, see their neighbors as spiritual souls conditioned in this material life toward one mad-dance or another.

The Monkey Bar

The sign welcoming patrons to the Monkey Bar says, "Shirts and shorts required. Bras and panties optional." One bartender wears a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey jump suit. He says he's the ringmaster. His circus: "whites, blacks, rock heads, streetwalkers, homosexuals." From the outside, with a fixed crew of unsavory characters lingering in its doorway, the Monkey Bar is forbidding, clearly the scourge of Miami Beach that the mayor always talks about shutting down. Inside, it's cool and quiet, almost a neighborhood bar. The topic of conversation is roaches. "I sprayed five cans," bartender Paul Loren says. "I let a couple of bombs off. Hopefully that did it." "You think the customers bring them in?" asks Jim Workman, a refrigerator repairman. "I think it's the neighborhood," Loren answers. The Monkey Bar no longer has a pay phone. "To keep the dope dealers out," Loren says. Everyone else is welcome.

mah-jongg and campaign dinners of roast chicken. On this night, Johnny Sex and the Bodacious Tots, a New York group, perform Hissle with My Hissle. They're a raunchy and other-wise entertaining sex on the very site of a dead Miami Beach landmark, the Embers Restaurant. The Embers, with its chandeliers and gilded mirror, was old Miami Beach. The decor at Club Nu is as 1980s as disposable razors. They'll throw it away every eight weeks. The premiere theme is Egyptian — pharaohs, feathers, mechanical slaves, pillars wrapped in hieroglyphics and live slaves walking on the bar to pick up empty glasses. "Great. But isn't it just a disco?" asks Chris Potosh, 23.

Place Pigalle

Gloria, a white-haired waitress posted late one night outside the Place Pigalle, doesn't think the venerable Beach strip joint will get any rub-off business from its new neighbor, Club Nu. "Did you see that fat guy go in there dressed like the Shah of Iran? Those people are extroverts. The people who come here, they like to watch," she says. When you first step inside the place — which takes its name from Paris' red-light district — the darkness is stunning, even at night. Pat Powers greets you. Wrapped in a leopard skirt, pitched forward on high heels, Powers wears big hexagonal glasses with thick fish-eye lenses. To look her in the eye is dizzying. To make entering the place a little like walking into a fun house. At the bar sits a curly-haired woman wearing a gold midriff top

SHIRTS & SHOES REQUIRED

Bras and Panties Optional...

UNINHIBITED A sign states the dress code at the Monkey Bar.



BRIAN SMITH / Miami Herald Staff



and a harem skirt. "My name is Tuesday, like the day after Monday, but spelled like sundae, as in the ice cream," she says. Tuesday commutes from Fort Lauderdale to work 9 to 5 — "that's p.m. to a.m." — as an exotic dancer. She's not a good dancer, she says, so she wears elaborate outfits that take a long time to remove. Club owner Ridge would just as soon his girls keep their clothes on. "This run-out-take-it-all-off doesn't mean nothing. Every corner bar has a nude brood," he says. Hovering near the stage is a thin old woman with long white hair, the wardrobe mistress. Guarding the entrance to dressing rooms filled with boxes, she is like a mute spirit, a strange ethereal overseer. "She's been hanging around forever. Her husband played drums here in the days we had real shows, like Sinatra," Ridge says. "Once we had some beautiful girls. Now we take whatever we can get." One by one, the women strip. Since the club is half empty, the barmaid and hostess clap. Some of the strippers have a sporadic timidity, stepping shyly behind the curtain to take off their clothes. A 20-year veteran, Sherry, has her own time-tested gimmick: a stomach flutter that looks as if she swallowed a swarm of butterflies. Aside from the men — young men, old men, men in business suits — there are two tables of Place Pigalle first-timers. One is filled with incredibly clean-cut out-of-towners referred there by the desk clerk at the nearby Holiday Inn. The other is a group of artists who wandered in after showing up too early at Club Nu. "This is absolutely camp, fabulous," says Lesley Tompsett, administrative coordinator of the South Florida Arts Center on Lincoln Road. "Forget about the Strand, the Wet Paint Cafe. We've been wooed away from Nu. The Place is the place." From 4 to 5 a.m., when the place dropped live music, he stayed on to bring coffee to the strippers. It also performs for the elderly, around the corner from Pigalle, at the Plymouth Hotel. "I love so much music. The people, they love so much me," says Luigi, really Ludwig Letkowitz, 63. Luigi is one of the 21st Street drifters. He carries cardboard to use as a pillow when he stops to sit on the porch of a hotel. "I don't really pay attention to the changes, to the dope dealers, he says. "All I see is my memory, although I notice that we have a new ice cream shop." Inside the salmon-colored Plymouth hotel with the tall green fin, Tuesday is Luigi night. He goes on right after bingo. For bingo, the elderly tenants sit in a circle in the lobby, still as sculptures in the Naugahyde sofas, served by waiters. The concentration is intense. Standing behind the front desk, night manager Lou Levin calls out the numbers, as he has for 40 years. O-68, 1-23, 2-24, 1-18, G-47. A feeble voice whispers, "Bingo." "Excuse me, Lou, I think she's Bingo," another woman says. "Oh—freak," Levin says. "Good for her. She can't even see," says another player. The payoff is a dollar. "Everyone wins. A year ago I won, so it don't take so long," says Doris Green. Luigi — who knows 350 tune all nationalities — gets \$10 for playing. Hat slicked, head thrown back, he tips the tail of his tattered jacket and settles on the piano bench. Finger by finger, he pulls on a pair of gloves. And then another pair. And then another. "Ladies and gentlemen, a tune from Fiddler on the Roof. ... No little sing-along. ... Now some thing happy. ... Now a little nut ber I played many years ago, in Paris, for Maurice Chevalier." Three girls from the Raitzens — a social dance club started by